

COLLECTIVE IMPACT + PEACE: COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

In 2017, Search for Common Ground launched an initiative to apply the **collective impact methodology** for youth-inclusive peacebuilding in **Colombo, Sri Lanka**. The project was established to introduce a different way for organizations and individuals to work together on addressing urban wellbeing issues caused by spatial injustice mainly deriving from rapid redevelopment and gentrification. Unlike typical projects, where NGOs or donors drive the agenda and selectively invite stakeholders for participation at different stages, this approach puts the decision making power in the hands of the people most affected by and involved in the issue across different stakeholder groups (local community, business, government, civil society, academia and religious platforms) for shared leadership and decision making. In Colombo, the initiative took the name **We Build Colombo Together**. Search provides “backbone” support, facilitating and guiding the initiative through a dedicated coordinator.



We Build Colombo Together (WBCT) is an informal network of approximately 150 representatives of communities and organizations across critical sectors in Colombo dedicated to improving urban wellbeing through collective action. WBCT enables shared decision making and collective action between people at the grassroots and those in positions of power and influence, based on locally-led analysis and evidence-based interventions.

INCLUSIVE DECISION MAKING - ACROSS SECTORS & DIVIDES

WBCT members come from **business, civil society, academia, government and security agencies, and local communities** in central Colombo. Inclusive decision making processes ensure that the diverse perspectives of those most affected and involved in urban conflict and marginalization are reflected in the group's strategic direction and action.

→ The core leadership team currently includes **12 members who meet monthly and represent state, private, community and civil society** at various levels and capacities, from a university student to a government officer, community leaders, theater activist, mobile journalist and mid-level CSR representative for a major local developer.

→ About **60% of the core team** are below the age of 30.

→ Over the past two years, WBCT has built trust and facilitated new collaboration between communities, private developers, and state officials in this community and the initiative has now expanded to **over 100 communities across the city, reaching an estimated 50% of the city's resident population.**

In 2017, the initiative began in the underserved and stigmatized neighborhood of Wekanda in an area known as “Slave Island” in central Colombo. Historically an area where enslaved people were held during British colonization, today Slave Island is a highly commercial area located just outside the central business district of Colombo. The area, which is home to a number of ethnic communities, is experiencing rapid gentrification due to enormous land development pressure as part of the country's multi-billion dollar redevelopment plan. The communities living in the areas targeted for redevelopment are often accused of urban violence and drug addiction, low educational attainment and poverty, however the residents blame the city for marginalizing and excluding ethnic and religious minorities from development dividends.

END VIOLENT CONFLICT

Belgium · Burkina Faso · Burundi · Central African Republic · DR Congo · Ethiopia · Guinea · Indonesia · Iraq · Jerusalem · Kenya · Kyrgyz Republic · Lebanon · Liberia · Macedonia · Madagascar · Mali · Morocco · Myanmar · Nepal · Niger · Nigeria · Rwanda · Senegal · Sierra Leone · South Sudan · Sri Lanka · Sudan · Tanzania · The Gambia · Tunisia · United States · Yemen

BOLD VISION & SYSTEMS FOCUS

Too often, the people and organizations working on and most affected by urban marginalization and exclusion have very different understandings of its root causes and how best to address it. A critical element of WBCT is **bringing together the diverse actors involved to review the data, develop a shared vision, and determine core pathways and strategies** for driving change.

→ To establish a common starting point before bringing the various stakeholders together, [we conducted research with local organization Centre for Poverty Analysis to identify the broken dynamics and conflicting perspectives in a key flashpoint for urban conflict: Kompannaweediya \(also known as “Slave Island”\), including: ambiguity over future land ownership and housing, stigmatization of poor urban communities, and growing disconnect and distrust among ethnoreligious groups, between urban communities and formal markets, and among state, private developers, and communities.](#)

→ [This research provided a launching point](#) for the conflicting parties to hear each other’s concerns and plans, but it took nearly a year more of one-on-one consultations and intra-group meetings to build sufficient trust and dialogue for a [joint systems analysis](#) in March 2018.

→ What resulted was a **collective vision for our work, reflected in the name “We Build Colombo Together” (WBCT).**

→ After initial efforts to build collective action around urban redevelopment, [the WBCT team shifted focus to “urban wellbeing” which has inspired and mobilized a wider, more diverse set of people and organizations.](#)

Our local research and systems analysis revealed key gaps & leverage points:

- Develop a more collaborative urban housing and redevelopment model for **integrating physical development changes with human wellbeing and development**, e.g. in involuntary resettlement of urban poor communities to state-built residential towers

- **Explore and leverage connections** between quality of education, employability, income, quality of life and local development challenges in poor urban communities

- Engage **underprivileged youth groups** as a change agent who can actively and strategically advance a new approach to collaboration around urban conflict

- Build on the community’s **existing organizations and structures, and its historically multilingual and multicultural nature**, which have both been a source for resilience in managing tensions.

- Introduce new methods of collaboration into **existing design processes and development plans** between communities, state agencies, and development companies for better pro-people and pro-business outcomes

JOINT & INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES LEVERAGE LEARNING & LOCAL RESOURCES

Systems thinking allows us to **identify patterns and gaps, and focus on “high-leverage” opportunities** for individual and joint activities to have the greatest cumulative impact. While some of our activities are conducted jointly, others may be pursued independently by members taking different approaches to reach different populations at different levels. A **process of shared learning** has been invaluable as JSCP members coordinate and adapt these activities towards greater collective impact. Equally important to the commitment to learning, is the dedication that JSCP members have demonstrated to collective action, **volunteering and donating their time and resources** to stretch the limited budget as far as possible.

→ WBCT facilitates [collaboration between communities and the private and public sectors where it has been limited or contentious](#), to align resources and improve urban wellbeing.

→ Ranging from digital literacy training for young people to community computer centers, rehabilitation of community and school facilities, to capacity building for community leaders, [each of our activities connects community, private, and public sector in new and innovative ways, replacing one-off one-sided engagements to longer-term partnerships to improve wellbeing.](#)

→ In 2017, [CDA Collaborative Learning Projects](#) joined Search’s initiative as a learning partner. They published a [learning paper on WBCT in January 2019](#).

WBCT in Action:

- WBCT is **revitalizing the community development committees (CDCs)** of Colombo in collaboration with Colombo Municipal Council, by empowering 330+ community leaders from 115 communities with ID cards. In a second phase, public, private, and civil society organizations will provide capacity building in various competencies for these community leaders and WBCT will support accountability for through an integrated reporting and monitoring mechanism.

- At the level of public policy, WBCT proposed a cabinet paper to ensure new mega-city and metropolis development projects account for communal ecosystems and collaboration with communities. Our proposal was accepted and the WBCT coordinator was selected to the ministerial working committee for the urban redevelopment project. The change in leadership with the presidential election ultimately nullified this cabinet order, however WBCT plans to resume the process in mid-2020, following parliamentary elections.

- In the wake of the devastating Easter bomb attacks, the Slave Island neighborhood was further stigmatized when a cache of weapons were discovered. WBCT organized an interfaith solidarity event and social media campaign to respond to the rise in hate speech and

→In the span of a little over a year, WBCT **mobilized over 75% of its activities budget** through individual financial contributions and in-kind support from local communities, government institutions, national businesses, and major development companies who offered meeting places and venues free of charge, provided services at no-cost, and aligned their own funded initiatives.

→The network has also facilitated **more than 12 partnerships between the state, private sector, and communities** to transform **planned CSR initiatives and public services to be more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the communities and youth**, from English language and livelihoods training to neighbourhood beautification projects.

→ WBCT members **communicate and share information regularly** through Facebook and Whatsapp, as well as in-person meetings and conference calls to review learning and make joint decisions about collective actions.

anti-Muslim rhetoric, promoting the diversity and tolerance of Slave Island's residents. **Our video received over 40,000 views.**

•In collaboration with a local partner and the municipal council, WBCT organized and designed a training series on digital literacy and mobile journalism for youth recently re-housed by the Urban Development Authority. Youth have used the skills developed to create **videos** and social media campaigns to promote economic growth and tolerance in their communities.

•WBCT is **mobilizing and connecting local resources** to rehabilitate a dilapidated local school- while a local architect firm offers pro-bono technical drawings and visualizations, youth from the community volunteered to create an urban garden for the school and clean up and enhance surrounding public areas, while local philanthropists and residents have donated school supplies.



BACKGROUND & CAPACITY

Search for Common Ground (Search) is one of the largest conflict transformation organizations in the world. Since 1982, we have led programs around the world to help societies channel their differences away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative solutions, with young people as key partners. Our long-term programming in 43 countries and network of over 1,200 partners around the world enabled Search to reach over 700,000 direct participants and 50 million people through media programs in 2016, in many of the world's most challenging conflicts.

Since establishing our Children and Youth division in 2002, Search has led the global peacebuilding field in working with young people as partners for peace.

As a founding co-chair of the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security, we have convened UN agencies, NGOs, youth-led civil society and other partners to create what is now known as the youth, peace and security agenda. In close partnership with both young people and power-holders, we innovate at the edges of peacebuilding practice and bring what we learn into the mainstream. Simultaneously, we work with power holders to transform traditional establishments and ways of engaging young people. This approach has seen considerable results in recent years, including the adoption of UN Security Council resolutions 2250 (2015) and 2419 (2018). We are currently at a key turning point to use these global frameworks to develop international and national mechanisms for meaningful youth participation.

CONTACTS

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For more information on Search for Common Ground's programs, please visit the following links:

www.sfcg.org
www.sfcg.org/children-and-youth/
www.sfcg.org/sri-lanka/